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Critical Success: Review of *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry* edited by Yopie Prins and Maaera Shreiber.

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Matuschka, *Arms Around You*, 1993-95. From *Art.Rage.Us.*

page is probably an illustration for the book on the left-hand page, but the viewer cannot be quite sure.

The book's shortcomings as an art book may be in part rooted in the relationship between art as therapy and art as lasting aesthetic contribution. Therapeutic art offers enormous empowerment to both individuals and society, but most of it is far better judged on personal meaningfulness than on more rigorous aesthetic standards. In other words, the power of therapeutic art for the viewer (as opposed to the artist) is almost entirely dependent on understanding the art's context and purpose, and on creating an emotional connection between the audience and the experience from which the artist drew the work.

"Fine" art, on the other hand, although it is also significantly informed by its context, will frequently offer an aesthetic and sometimes an emotional experience to a viewer who is not privy to its context. Many of the pieces in this book are extremely strong because the reader knows both the circumstances of the artist and the intended message; yet they would have little power were they simply hung in a gallery or a museum exhibition focusing, perhaps, on the medium in which they were created.

Yet although a surprisingly large number of the works in *Art.Rage.Us.* are best judged as therapeutic art, a few pieces stand out as exceptions. Among them are Sylvia Colette Gehres' pastel *Reflection*, which does an extraordinary job of conveying the personal power of its subject; Rella Lossy's poetry (quoted in small part above); and the above-mentioned *Johnna Becomes a Birch Tree,* which incorporates real birch bark and birch branches with clay, mirror and wire mesh to create a powerfully subversive retelling of the classic dryad myth as an allegory for death.

THE COMPILERS ALSO demonstrate no intent to present this work as a political document. First and foremost, the book inexcusably fails to cross the essential hurdle of diversity. Among well over one hundred pieces of art and writing, only one prose piece is identifiably by (and about) a person of color (*No Neva Mind/ It's Mine/ I Mind* by Wanna Wright), two photographs are *of* women of color, and one other artist can be theoretically identified as a woman of color by her surname. In this context, it must be noted that the photograph of a black woman on the cover of the book was not part of the exhibition, and was (apparently) designed specifically for the book by a male designer.

The preface mentions that "many groups, individuals, and constituencies" were consulted in forming the exhibition, but does not name them. Since there are roughly twice as many deaths per incidence of breast cancer in the African American population as in the white population, and since early detection (the greatest indicator of survival) is always rarer in the various minority and underserved populations, the lack of attention paid to racial balance is especially distressing.

Race is not the only measure of diversity, and the others are handled equally disgracefully. While husbands play a central role toward the end of the book, pictured and described as evidence that women with mastectomies can still be beautiful, the existence of women lovers is left to be inferred from the nature of certain collaborations and the reading of one piece of tattooed skin. The concerns of men with breast cancer (a small but highly endangered group) are never acknowledged, even in passing.

In addition, *Art.Rage.Us.* pays surprisingly little attention to the politics of its own core subject. The fight against breast cancer has become a passionately political movement, which does not seem to have been a concern of this exhibition. Imogene Franklin Hubbard's powerful photo collage, *Industrial Growth*, does speak to the emissions of industrial waste, and Sheila Sridharan, in *Cause,* depicts the medically prescribed hormones that she believes led to her cancer. These two works, however, represent the entire attention paid to the political aspects of the disease and potential cure.

More attention to artistic concerns and more value placed on diversity and the political aspects of breast cancer and women's lives would have made *Art.Rage.Us.* a far richer and more lastingly important book. However, taken on its own terms, the only implicit promise the book makes is that it will bring us intensely personal statements by breast cancer sufferers. And that promise is kept exquisitely well. As long as breast cancer and the fear of it threaten women's lives, *Art.Rage.Us.* will do much to create hope and ameliorate pain for an audience that craves its complex messages of disease and healing, helplessness and creativity.

This review was greatly enhanced by the contributions of Laurie Toby Edison.

Critical success

by Meryl Altman

Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry, edited by Yopie Prins and Maaera Shreiber. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997, 373 pp., $49.95 hardcover, $19.95 paper.

WHO READS LITERARY CRITICISM? Other literary critics, presumably. But not with pure delight. Finding out what others have written about one's topic is meant to be an early stage of scholarly research; but for me the task of wading through article after redundant article, many of them obviously destined (in ambition or desperation) just to pad the résumé or the tenure file, is instead too often the last gesture of an aborted project. Why write, if one can imagine being read in this dingy spirit only? Why add to the dismal glut?

While thus groping and groaning my way along the library shelf, MLA citations in hand, I accidentally came across *Dwelling in Possibility*, a big, complicated, lovely book, which made me ashamed of my mean-spirited mood and reminded me why writing about literature in an intellectually sophisticated and politically committed way once struck me as a passionately interesting thing to do. From a scholar's point of view, this anthology is immensely erudite, detailed, precise and thoughtful; it does not dodge the difficult theoretical questions of the last two decades, yet it is faithful to feminist first principles, especially to the idea that women's writing matters. (We may no longer be quite sure what women's writing *is*, but we may still be sure that it matters: as the editors say on page one, "gender may be a hypothetical category and yet a condition of life.")

While many of the contributions here are fairly traditional discussions of a writer or a genre (the modernist long poem, the Renaissance love lyric), roughly half give us a living woman poet introducing several of her own poems, explaining and then showing what she does. The collection would be worth having only for the wonderful writing in this vein by such familiar names as Rita Dove, Joy Harjo, Eavan Boland, Marilyn Hacker, Olga Broumas and T Begley; by less well-known poets M. Nourbese Philip, Susan Howe, Eleanor Wilner; and by some who are known primarily for writing in other genres—Anne Carson, bell hooks, Alicia Ostriker, Rachel Blau DuPlessis.

Somehow the company of the poets keeps the critical voices grounded. And something (the company of the critics? the astute choice of editors?) stimulates poets beyond silly answers to *Paris Review*-type questions. The same perplexes and paradoxes of gender and genre that come up in the critical essays actually appear to animate the creative work, to make the visions of the poets possible. There are links in all directions, often unexpected ones, subthemes running through: I was particularly moved by a running focus on lamentation that led from Angela Bourke's reception history of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, to Maeera Shreiber on Adrienne Rich's Jewishness, to bell hooks' discussion of how Christian scripture figures in her work, to Kathryn Gutzwiller's presentation of Erinna, who wrote about the death of a woman friend in the fourth century BCE. Issues of collaboration, translation, continuity versus originality, oral performance versus written text, run throughout, as does the problem of finding voice in a divided language, a divided culture.

This last is most salient in writing by and about women of color, as when Native American Joy Harjo remarks that "we are all changed by the overculture" and M. Nourbese Philip speaks of (and demonstrates) "the anguish that is English" for the African Caribbean writer. A number of essays are concerned in whole or in part with the "dislocations" of American Jewish identity; these writers too talk of confrontation, of margin and center, but also of negotiation, crossing over, mediation, "moving back and forth." A similar rhetoric comes into play when Diana Henderson writes about the European Renaissance love lyric: though it was devalued as a feminine genre, and though paradoxically at the same time women's access to it was not without restraints, she observes that the sonnet "gave women a space in which to work."

Often the poet and the critic are the same person. Alicia Ostriker turns up both in Susan Stanford Friedman's discussion of the "long poem," and then later in her own piece about her conflicted Jewish heritage. Rachel Blau DuPlessis invents a new form of critical writing, aware of literary history but not deferential to its models, in the course of explaining her new form of poetic practice. Anne Carson is pre-eminent among scholars and translators from the ancient Greek in this country; her essay shows why; her poem strikes sparks. In "A Few Cranky Paragraphs on Form and Content," Marilyn Hacker speaks both as poet and as "once and future editor," as a writer hoping for intelligent readers and as a reader hoping for intelligent and powerful poems.

> Is there a place for mediocre poetry? Do we want there to be? (And who is "we"—me, Richard Wilbur, June Jordan, Miguel Algarín, Helen Vendler?) My first impulse is to say: no, there's not. Then I recall how much hot-headed, right-on, and mediocre feminist poetry it took to produce a climate where a woman poet isn't still Dr. Johnson's dancing dog (not that she does it well, but that she does it at all); how much African American verse rhetoric had to be written, read, and processed so that Yusef Komunyakaa, Rita Dove, Thylias Moss could free themselves of having to be representative or exemplary and can write—whatever and however they damn please! As an editor, I'm much more strongly inclined to work through drafts one, four, seven with a poet until we reach one I'm willing (eager) to publish if the poem deals with events, presents a point of view, not yet obvious: the point of view of an HIV-positive woman, a description of open-heart surgery, or a convincing rendering of a jam session. And I'd have the same inclination toward a not-yet-entirely successful poem in an intriguing/difficult/invented-but-rigorous form. (p. 195)

TO READ FOR GENRE without noticing gender (except dismissively) was the mistake of phallic criticism; to read for gender without thinking through genre was the enabling mistake of the first wave of feminist critics. Prins and Schreiber's task here is to work with both frameworks without reifying either, to find interactions, negotiations, paradoxes,

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oxymorons, ambivalences, compensations, play; in short, to find whatever one finds. So, translation as a genre will always figure a relation to authority, but will do so differently for the Augustan Anne Finch than for the two Victorian poets who wrote as Michael Field: Jayne Elizabeth Lewis and Yopie Prins (respectively) give enough history for us to see how and why. The "lyric" can appear either the most phallic or the most feminine of genres, depending on when and where the poet stands; to find voice may mean undoing either or both, as when Philip asks "Why should anyone care how the 'I' that is me feels, or how it recollects my emotions in tranquillity?" and answers by "messin with the lyric."

Suppose it can be shown that both "traditional" and "experimental" languages/impulses are coded as male: what is a woman writer to do? Whatever she wants to! Two of my favorite writers, Hacker and DuPlessis, argue for the productivity of opposite approaches: Hacker writes in sapphics and alcaics, DuPlessis writes "Otherhow," struggling toward a form never before seen. This seems exactly right. If there was a war (there isn't) between "those who would save poetic traditions" and "those who would burst them apart," they'd be in different camps—but what a silly idea.

Perhaps the best sign about this collection is that, as I read, I kept adding to my "to do" list. "Order more Joy Harjo, Eavan Boland." "Find out more about Higginson's feminism." "Who borrowed Stevie Smith's poems? Get it back, and *read* it." "Ask Andrea about Woolf on Finch." "Reread *Winter Numbers*." And so on. Not that everyone would make the same list, but this is how an anthology should work—as the beginning of reading, not the end.

Every essay in this collection is a solid meal, nothing is skippable or skimmable; while the writers are sometimes erudite they are never snobbish. They answer questions that readers might already have, and raise other questions that emerge directly from text or context to challenge familiar readings. What happens to a woman's lament for her murdered husband when it is torn from oral performance, institutionalized as a founding piece of Irish literature? What should we do with a woman writer, like Anne Finch or Stevie Smith, who doesn't seem particularly feminist or subversive, except at odd moments? Who were Nossis and Erinna, Lady Mary Wroth, "Michael Field," and why should I care? When I read "the Poems of Emily Dickinson," am I really reading Emily Dickinson's poems—and if not, what should I do? These are real questions about poetry, not made-up questions designed to display the critic's own sophistication or demonstrate some general proposition about something else.

The figures of Emily Dickinson and Sappho are particularly well-adapted to this collective project. The farther away a poet is in time, the more fragmented or "foreign" her text, the less pompously self-justifying critical commentary needs to be: we need the critic, evidently. As "Sappho" and "Emily" come to us, both the textual corpus and the literal historical body of work are fragmentary and richly problematic.

If she can still serve as a precursor for such disparate late twentieth-century projects as Eavan Boland's deceptively clear carrying-over of her life as a mother, and Broumas and Begley's multivocal and deliberately opaque weave of Lesbian eroticism, perhaps it is true that "Sappho" is no more than an enabling fiction. But she's still a pretty stunning one: not only are people still squabbling over what some of the words mean, she is still taking women poets by the hand in their dreams.

I ALSO HAD OCCASION, over this past summer, to look back at some of the earliest, founding books of feminist literary criticism—Patricia Meyer Spacks, Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter's first book... Twenty years is a long time. "I wouldn't write that now," as Anna said in *The Golden Notebook*, but I do feel some nostalgia for the possibilities of critical "voice" in the days when one book could promise the whole truth about women (often the first sentence would start, "since the dawn of time") and one could call one's course simply "Women and Literature," and do *everything*, if only because it was the only course on the books and so it had to.

I certainly don't miss the naive ethnocentricity of those early accounts, or the attempts to specify a central content to "female experience" (inevitably leaving somebody out), and searches for an "aesthetic," whether feminist, feminine, or simply "women's," still strike me as wrong-headed. And yet, there was an emotional and political energy to that writing, a sense that what is being said is risky personally and professionally but that nonetheless it must be said. Now that those risks have paid off, the excitement is harder to find. Many people complain that feminist criticism has become inaccessible; for me, the true issue isn't "jargon" (any field of study is entitled to a specialized vocabulary) but whether one can identify, and identify with, the question being addressed, whether it is a question that matters.

Prins and Shreiber have made me feel that it is possible to emerge from this cul-de-sac with a sustained sense of feminist project and energy. The Names of the (big) Brothers, Lacan and Derrida, are here, but sparsely, where they actually seem to help, and the insights of post-structuralist theory certainly inform Prins and others. But the project is not circumscribed by the desire to prove or disprove or honor or dishonor it, or to play little games in which the text vanishes up the critic's sleeve and takes the world with it. The introduction proclaims lack of a consensus on these and other points; that's certainly both right and good.

Nor am I exalting "practice" over something called "theory" here: things move forward theoretically when we can see that something "doesn't fit," that a certain longish poem is not an epic but is not *not* an epic, that "Michael Field" are and aren't "lesbians," and so on. We won't see this sort of thing if we aren't looking for it.

The book's first two sections are called "Questioning the Subject" and "The Voice in Question," which suggests that the editors have some anxiety about whether terms like "silence" and "voice" and "experience" may still be used after postmodern critiques of the unity of the subject and the transparency of language, as well as the charges aimed at "Woman" from positions other than white and other than heterosexual. But this collection reminds us that what theorists now describe as the impossibility of the single "I" or the single "voice," poets have always known. For anybody who actually writes, the subject is of course in question, the voice is in question.

But the question has (sort of) an answer: look, I did it, I *wrote*. *I* wrote. Here's the poem, or the paragraph. Many of the poets who speak or are spoken of here write from the positions—split, complicated, oppositional, oppressed—where those critiques of "subject" originated; but the power and originality of each individual and yet rooted voice is also the answer. And part of the answer is, don't worry, write.

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